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ABSTRACT

As older adults seek career management assistance in ever-increasing numbers, career counselors will need to know about issues and job search strategies specific to that population. In order to stay current with the changing times in the career world of older adults, both groups (the older adults themselves and the career counselors) will need resources for education and support. One important resource is the Vital Aging Network, sponsored by the University of Minnesota's College of Continuing Education. This chapter discusses some of the reasons more older adults are seeking professional career management services; explores how to deal with job search issues specific to this population; and provides background and information about the Vital Aging Network and its accompanying Web site. (Contains 10 references.) (GCP)

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Career Development for Vital Agers: Meeting the Challenge

by

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Career Development for Vital Agers: Meeting the Challenge

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Introduction

There is a Bob Dylan song that reminds us "…the times, they are a-changin'…" and the words are especially true when it comes to career counseling for older adults. As older workers seek career management assistance in ever-increasing numbers, career counselors will need to know about issues and job-search strategies specific to that population. In order to stay current with the changing times in the career world of older adults, both groups (the older adults themselves and the career counselors) will need resources for education and support. One important resource is the Vital Aging Network, sponsored by the University of Minnesota's College of Continuing Education. This paper will discuss some of the reasons more older adults are seeking professional career management services; explore how to deal with job-search issues specific to this population; and provide background and information about the Vital Aging Network and its accompanying Web site.

Throughout this paper the term "older adults" will often be replaced by the term "vital agers" – people age 55 years or more who are healthy, active and who wish to maintain meaningful lifework. For the purposes of this paper, lifework describes an ongoing process across all stages of the life cycle, unique to each individual, that includes all activities that contribute to the enhancement of one's own life and/or that of others, e.g., parenting, homemaking, employment, volunteer service, care giving, education, etc. The career counselor's role is to assist with lifework planning – the means by which an individual assesses, explores, plans and makes decisions about his or her lifework. This discussion will focus on the career counselor's role specific to employment-related guidance.

Increasing Need for Career Assistance

For a number of reasons, career counselors are seeing a rise in the numbers of vital agers seeking their services. First and foremost:

> …the youngest of the vital agers are the eldest of the baby boom generation, persons born between 1946 and 1964. Between 1995 and 2025, the population that is 55 and older will increase much more sharply than any other age group. In 1996 baby boomers were between the ages of 32 and 50. By the end of 2005, the first of the baby boomers will begin to turn 60 [and] …there will be about 55

> million workers 45 and older, or about 37 percent of the labor force. Much of the increase will occur in the 50 to 60 year old category... [so] one can anticipate that the demand for employment services by older workers will increase as the baby boom generation ages over the next twenty years. (Poulos and Smith Nightingale, 1997)

The employment services to which the cited authors are referring are employment and training programs such as the Job Training Partnership Act, but it seems safe to extrapolate a corresponding demand for career transition counseling services from the same growing audience. "In fact, approximately 50% of all public sector employees at any level of government and in all but one state will be pension eligible by 2010." (Fredericksen, 2001) The situation becomes more complicated as research per retention of Minnesota State employees demonstrate "recent surges in health insurance costs and diminishing returns on investments is causing the average worker to re-evaluate their retirement plans and consider extended employment under more flexible conditions." (Fredericksen, 2001)

Another reason vital agers are turning to career professionals for assistance is resurgence in the desire to find careers or lifework activities that provide purpose and meaning. A desire for a career that provides meaning is not a new phenomenon. Kotter (1984) compiled a list of expectations of what makes organizations attractive to an individual, and "a sense of meaning or purpose in the job" and "personal development opportunities" were the top two reasons given. (Cited in Zunker, 1994) However, in the late 1980's and 1990's, as the economy fluctuated and downsizing became the norm, desire for stability rose in importance as a criteria for determining prospective employers. Dr. Larry Craft understands the impact of uncertainty on employee productivity. "...Employees will tend to look for companies that offer consistency and will likely shy away from jobs...where the potential for turnover is the highest." (Waldo, 2001) Currently, based on an informal survey of clients who have sought career counseling at the University of Minnesota's Career and Lifework Center, a desire to find purpose and meaning in work seems to once again be the top driver in the employment search. The September 11th, 2001 tragedy is often cited by Center clients across the age spectrum as one of the precipitating factors in that desire.

Yet another motivator for vital agers in seeking career counseling is the fact that life expectancy is increasing, but more to the point, it is "healthy" life expectancy. This means that not only are "individuals living longer after they retire, but they are healthy enough to continue working or performing other productive activity than previously had been the case." (Poulos and Smith Nightingale, 1997) This often translates to an aspiration to maintain meaningful lifework, and it has been the author's experience that this often includes some kind of paid employment. Frequently, vital agers who use the services of the Career and Lifework Center have had successful careers, and though they may "retire" from their primary careers, they expect to live many more years and wish to continue working for pay long after traditional retirement – often in completely new fields. They require assistance with knowing how to get started exploring their options, determining whether re-training or additional education is necessary and/or viable, and/or identifying transferable skills and areas of interest, and/or preparing resumes and conducting informational interviews.

Career Counseling Issues Specific to Vital Agers

In many respects, career counseling a vital ager is the same as career counseling any client with a history of professional employment. Very often, it may involve guidance in dealing with grief for the loss of a previous position (or an entire career) and associated colleagues and protocols. Assessments may be used to determine interests, values, aptitudes and personality traits. Additionally, identifying transferable skills might revise their resume into a functional or skills-based format. Other issues that may need to be discussed are learning about use of technology in the job search; networking to learn of work opportunities; informational interviewing; and negotiating salaries and benefits. Some of the issues that differentiate the older job seeker from younger clients that may need to be addressed in counseling include: financial flexibility; employers' attitudes towards older workers; and their own attitudes about themselves.

Financial flexibility: Many older clients seeking assistance from the Career and Lifework Center at the University of Minnesota have been financially successful in their careers, and are free of the need to make a substantial income. This affluence among vital agers is fairly prevalent.

> In 1990, there were more than sixty million sixtysomethings in the United States, most in good health and many in sound financial condition. Although there are pockets of poor elders...poverty [was] at the lowest level in [the] century for sixtysomethings...and financial planning along with Social Security has made the economic prospects excellent...(*USA Weekend*, cited in Hudson, 1999)

This economic well being is partially explained by Poulos and Smith Nightingale: "The 50 year old of today...was reaching adulthood and entering the workforce in the late 1960s and early 1970s...when...the nation's economy was strong, interest rates were low, and wages increased annually." (Poulos and Smith Nightingale, 1997) And, in a recent *TIME* magazine article, other reasons for vital agers' financial comfort are provided: [They] may have paid off the mortgage and finished with child-related expenses including tuition [and] probably have saved much of what [they] need for financial security. At the Career and Lifework Center, as vital agers explore what to do for the next chapter of their professional lives, they often discover that their primary goal is to make a difference in the world or to maintain (or establish) a sense of purpose and meaning. People approaching "the traditional retirement age of 65," are advised to "...trade in your demanding full-time job for one that is fun or rewarding, though lower paying." (Kadlec, 2002) Frederic Hudson, adult educator and author, corroborates the idea of finding work that provides more intrinsic rewards: "If work has been a central source of meaning up to now, build it into your scenario...It doesn't have to be full-time work or even work in the same career field, but it should be a source of deep meaning and personal fulfillment..."(Hudson, 1999)

Perceptions about what employers' attitudes are towards older workers: Many vital agers believe that employers simply will not consider hiring them. They are apprehensive that their age will be considered a detriment before they have the opportunity to prove otherwise, or that younger candidates will be less expensive to hire and therefore will be more attractive to employers. In fact, in a 1997 study commissioned by The National Council on Aging, researchers found that for the most part, employers in this country hold positive attitudes toward older

workers and have positive experiences with those older workers in their workforce. Most respondents reported that they believed older workers were reliable, thorough, conscientious, and dependable. In general, the employers embraced the key benefits often touted about older workers—they have fewer on-the-job accidents, miss less time than younger workers, and are very conscientious and careful in carrying out their assignments. (Wagner, 1998) And in "Valuing Older Workers," a report by AARP in 1995, managers describe the older worker as having had more experience, better judgment, a stronger commitment to quality, more reliable attendance, punctuality and lower turnover. (AARP, 1995) The career counselor can reassure vital aging career transitioners with this data, and suggest they mention these characteristics in the profile section of their resumes.

It is also imperative that career counselors work to educate employers about the value of older workers while dispelling the erroneous beliefs they may have about them. For instance, the New York Department of Labor points out myths about older workers that might be barriers: ...the belief that older works can't meet a job's physical demands; the belief that older workers will be absent too often because of illness; the fear that senior workers aren't adaptable and trainable; the belief that older workers cost more. In countering, they cite that:

- Less than 12 percent of today's jobs require great physical strength;
- Surveys show older workers have better attendance than younger workers;
- Evaluations of older workers show a high degree of flexibility;
- Studies show that older workers are willing to accept a beginner's salary in beginner's position. (Callo, 1997)

Attitudes about themselves: It is not surprising for vital agers who are seeking new positions to feel as though they have proven themselves in the work world already, and they may harbor attitudes of reluctance about learning how to market themselves, particularly if they've been in one organization or career for a long time. The counselor may need to educate them on the importance of informational interviewing, attending the meetings of professional organizations, updating their resumes and becoming comfortable with the use of technology to sell themselves. For example, it is becoming increasingly popular for new college graduates to present their resume portfolios using a compact disc on a laptop computer in the interview. The older job seeker will need to demonstrate similar willingness to be technologically savvy if he or she wishes to compete with the younger candidates.

In addition to the practical job search considerations, the counselor will need to assess the older client's general sense of self and outlook on life. Career counselors have long told job-seekers who have lost their jobs to down-sizing to deal with any potential anger issues before they interview. Employers who perceive anger may use it as a red flag and not make an offer. Likewise, vital agers need to eliminate any underlying attitudes that they feel they are too old to work, or that the employer will not be interested in them. Employers will detect these signals, and the attitude can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Key ideas for counselors to convey to vital aging clients to help combat these attitudes include:

- Commit to living to one hundred. The sooner you do, the sooner you commit to having a vision and a plan for the rest of your life.
- Invest in your best choices – nutrition, exercise, and social relationships are more important than genetic structures.
- Keep up, mentally, with your fields of expertise, with new knowledge and skills,

with areas of emerging interest.

- Maintain as high a level of physical fitness as you can.
- Develop mental attitudes that promote positive aging – basic optimism, healthy self-esteem, a willingness to adapt to new situations, etc.
- Manage stress – your body will resist illness better.
- Continue to learn new things – continuous learning tops the list of factors that scientists have found to promote longevity and the retention of mental activity.
- Invest in your relationships with family and friends. (Hudson, 1999)

The Vital Aging Network

The Vital Aging Network stems from the work conducted by Dr. Janet Hively as she was writing her 2001 doctoral thesis entitled *Productive Aging in Rural Minnesota.* Dr. Hively was concerned about the impact of attitudes about aging that contradicted the realities of the capabilities of older adults. Prevalent attitudes encourage ageism, encourage early withdrawal from the labor force, and focus public policies on the frail elderly, with minimal attention paid to empowering the productivity of seniors.

Dr. Hively's research in Mid-Minnesota demonstrated the connection between meaningful lifework activities and a sense of personal fulfillment and also the connection between the productivity of older adults and community sustainability. Recognizing these connections, Dr. Hively established the Vital Aging Initiative through the University of Minnesota's College of Continuing Education, with the purpose of connecting older adults with education programs that support their self-sufficiency, community participation and personal enrichment. The principles of the Initiative were that the programs should be designed for employers, service providers and policy makers as well as for older adults, and that the process should facilitate the sharing of strengths among older adults.

The outcomes of the Vital Aging Initiative have included: regional forums on older workers throughout Minnesota; a Vital Aging Summit attended by over 400 people in March of 2002; the creation of a Vital Aging Web site (http://www.van.umn.edu) which serves as a resource directory for a vast number of diverse services for vital agers; and the establishment of the Vital Aging Network (VAN). VAN is an informal network of individuals and organizations interested in sharing information and building partnerships to help shape a new societal vision of what it means to grow old. There is a monthly VAN forum, usually attended by about 30 people, and an electronic mail listserv sent to almost 700. VAN is open to all who share the following values:

- Self-determination is central for the realization of civil and human rights.
- Everyone should be encouraged and supported in being as self-sufficient as possible.
- The vital involvement and integration of older adults in communities is necessary for individual and community health.
- Older adults are a community resource. Their productivity and contributions must be recognized, encouraged and supported.
- Communities should recognize and support the mutuality of interests across generations.
- Ageism is a pervasive form of bigotry that must be challenged.

Managed by the University of Minnesota's Career and Lifework Center, the Vital Aging Network (VAN) has the potential to be a significant force in shaping public policy and transforming

widely held beliefs about older adults. For older adults interested in finding personal direction, the VAN Web site provides good career guidance information and lifework information, and a link to professional career assistance.

Summary

The aging of the baby boomers, the longing for work that provides purpose and meaning, changing economies and the fact that healthy life expectancy is increasing, are all contributing reasons as to why increasing numbers of older adults are seeking professional career assistance. While many aspects of career counseling older adults are similar to counseling other age groups, certain issues differentiate the needs of this population. There is some greater financial flexibility; there are sometimes inaccurate perceptions about the attitudes of employers towards older workers – as well as some perceptions that do exist that need to be changed; and there may be certain self-defeating attitudes of the older workers about themselves.

Career counselors can offer strategies to vital aging clients to offset concerns about high salary requirements. They can also reassure them that for the most part, employers hold positive attitudes towards older workers. Vital aging clients will benefit from advice on the importance of "staying connected" through informational interviewing and networking and becoming or remaining technologically savvy. Optimism, maintaining good physical and mental health, strong relationships and continuous learning are all factors that will enhance any vital agers' probability of maintaining meaningful lifework.

The Vital Aging Network and Web site, managed by the University of Minnesota's Career and Lifework Center, are significant resources for older adults interested in seeing all their options and finding personal direction. As advocates for vital aging, career professionals will also find the Web site helpful as well, both as a referral source for their clients and as a guide for changes in community and professional practice.

Conclusion

The times are changing in the world of career counseling for older adults. While it has always been an exciting and dynamic field, the burgeoning interest in seeking professional career assistance from this relatively new and rapidly growing population presents an added dimension for which career counselors must prepare. Not only do we need to address the issues specific to vital aging career transitioners, we can help to raise employers' awareness of the value older workers contribute. In Minnesota, older workers, employers and professionals are fortunate to have the Vital Aging Network and Web site as a resource for education and support.

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